

FRANK READE



WEEKLY MAGAZINE,

Containing Stories of Adventures on Land, Sea & in the Air.

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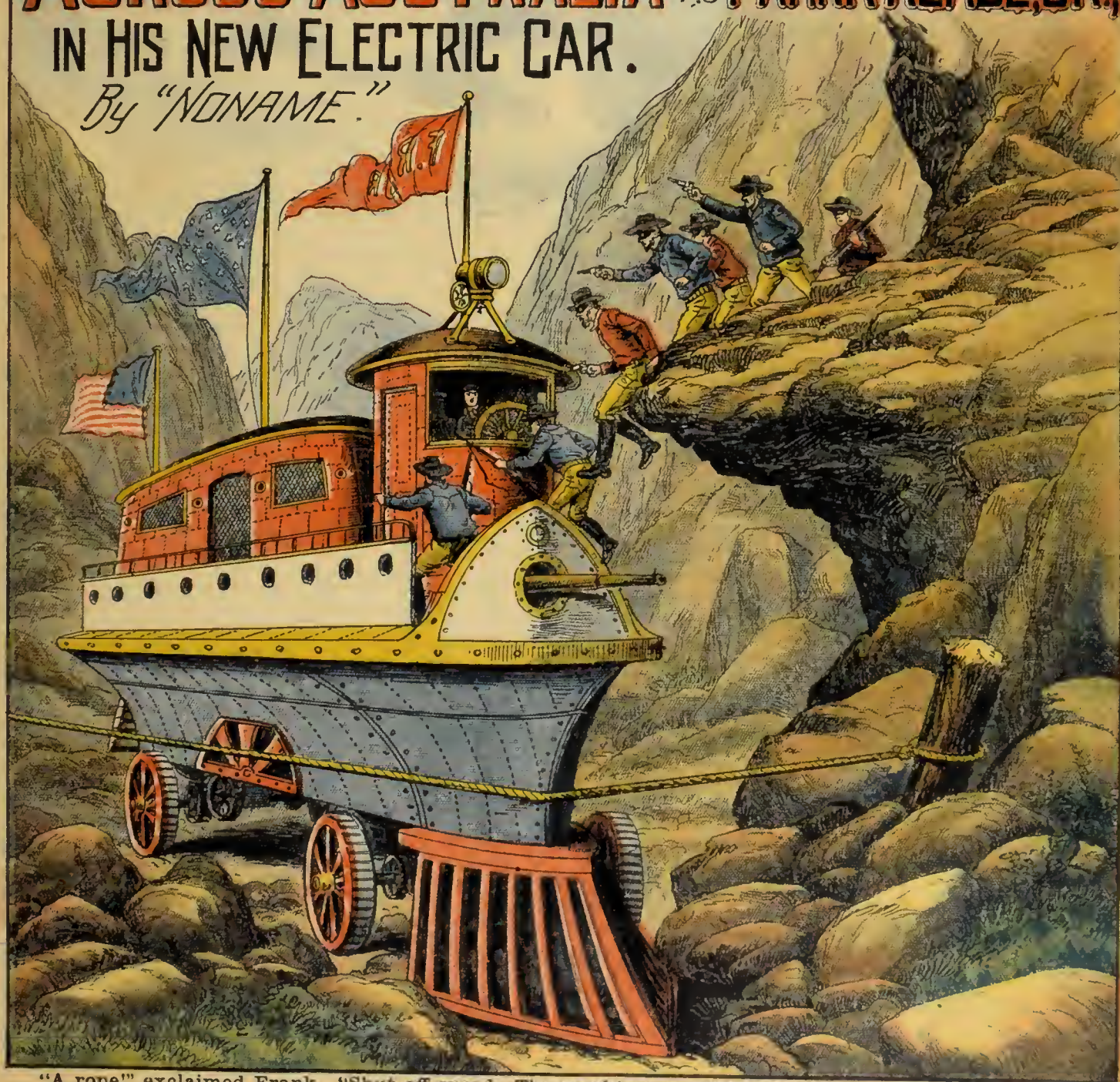
No. 63.

NEW YORK, JANUARY 8, 1904.

Price 5 Cents.

ACROSS AUSTRALIA ^{WITH} FRANK READE, JR., IN HIS NEW ELECTRIC CAR.

By "NONAME."



"A rope!" exclaimed Frank. "Shut off speed. The machinery will break." Barney shut off the electric current. Directly above the car was a ledge. Down from this like monkeys there dropped a half dozen masked men upon the deck.

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NEW YORK, JANUARY 8, 1904.

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Across Australia with Frank Reade, Jr., in His New Electric Car.

By "NONAME."

CHAPTER I.

THE AUSTRALIAN AND HIS SCHEME.

What more wonderful land of romance and of mystery is there upon the face of the earth than the great continent of Australia?

With its vast unexplored area, it furnishes a field for the traveler and explorer unexcelled by any other.

Frank Reade, Jr., the most noted inventor of the known world, had just evolved a new product which was said to eclipse any previous effort.

When it is borne in mind that he was the famous originator of the electric air-ship and the submarine boat, this may at once be recognized as an extraordinary statement.

Rumor had it that the new invention was an electric coach, and that the inventor intended making an extensive tour of the Western plains with it.

But this report was only partly right.

It was an electric car and not a coach. The journey intended was really first planned to be across the plains, but some events changed the programme.

A host of newspaper men besieged the residence and machine works of Frank Reade, Jr., in Readestown, trying to get the fullest particulars.

But these Frank would not at once disclose. He evaded all inquiries for a time.

But yet much leaked out, and it chanced that a man in a distant city saw an account of the machine and was deeply impressed.

He was a world-wide traveler, by name Wallace Dane.

Tall, erect, and bronzed, being of middle age, he was just the man for an arduous undertaking, for a life of adventure and risk.

He had just returned from a six-years' wandering in the bush of Australia. The death of his father necessitating the settling of a large estate, had called him home.

But before leaving Australia Wallace Dane had made a vow to return.

He had left a great object unaccomplished. It was an end which it did not seem within human power to gain.

From some blacks, whom he had made friends with in the bush, he had gained the information that the interior of Tasman Land held a mighty lake.

This covered hundreds of square miles in area, and was surrounded by an arid, sandy desert, which it was as much as one's life was worth to venture into.

Indeed, a dozen exploring parties had lost their way and perished on that plain of death.

The peculiarity of the Tasman Lake, and the reason why it was so ardently sought for, was that for a month in the year it ran absolutely dry, and from its sandy bed gold could be literally scraped up in heaps of dust and nuggets.

This report had inflamed the mind of many a luckless miner who had with his life paid the penalty.

It was Wallace Dane's one crowning desire to find the lake and open the new gold field.

He had been deterred by many almost insurmountable obstacles.

It was difficult to find daring spirits whom he could trust to accompany him.

All shrank with dread and almost superstitious horror from the undertaking.

His boon companion, Jerry Preston, had shook his head ominously and said:

"No good will come of it, I tell you, Wallace! Better stick to the old lines. There is a hoodoo upon that dry lake."

"I am going to try it some time," said Dane, doggedly. "You will see that I will succeed!"

"Ugh!" grunted his partner. "I am afraid you're risky, pard."

But Wallace still clung to his hobby.

He even went so far as to get all equipments together. Then came the urgent letter from America, demanding his return.

He left Melbourne determined to return within the year. But it took a long while to settle the estate.

So it happened that, seated in the reading-room of the Gilsey House of New York City one day, he read an interesting account of Frank Reade, Jr.

At once he was thrilled.

A wild idea came to him.

"On my word!" he muttered, "that is a sure and certain way of exploring the Dry Lake country. If I only had a machine like that——"

He ceased muttering. A startling idea came to him.

He arose and paced the floor for a few moments.

Then he sat down and wrote out a telegraph blank. Thus it was worded:

"MR. FRANK READE, JR., Readestown, U. S. A. My Dear Sir—If I can show you a mighty object to be at-

tained, would you care to change your plans and make Australia the scene of your explorations with your electric car? I can promise you wonderful results. Will be glad to divide with you all expenses of such a trip. If you care to entertain this proposition please wire me by return.

"As an evidence of good faith and my responsibility, I name as references Basil Bailey, banker, No. 10 Wall street; Burton & Bond, attorneys, 900 Broadway, or the Chemical National Bank. Awaiting your answer.

"WALLACE DANE.

"Gilsey House, New York City."

For two hours Dane paced the floor of the hotel lobby.

His mind was in a seething whirl. After a time a telegraph boy dodged in from the street.

Instantly Dane clutched him almost savagely.

"The message, quick!" he gritted.

The boy writhed.

"Leggo my arm!" he cried, "if I was big enough I'd hammer you for that. How do I know you're the bloke what belongs to this telegram?"

But Dane had already grabbed the despatch and was reading it. The reading had a wonderful effect upon him.

Thus it read:

"MR. WALLACE DANE.

"Am inclined favorably toward your proposition. Would like more detail. Your references all right. Can you come out to Readestown and see me?"

"Yours hastily,

FRANK READE, JR."

Wallace Dane drew a gulping breath, crushed the message in his hand and muttered:

"Eureka! the gods are with me. Luck is mine once more."

"Ye might sign fer that message," whimpered the boy. "I bet if my brother was here you wouldn't have got it so easy."

Mechanically Dane signed the book. Then he pulled a gold half eagle from his pocket and flipped it between the pages. Then he strode away, leaving the lad quite dumfounded.

"Cracky!" he muttered. "Wonder if he's one of ther Vanderbilt family? He kin squeeze my shoulder agin for anudder shiner like dat if he wants ter! See!"

Dane went to his room, and in ten minutes, by the little marble clock, his grip was packed.

Then he went down and leaped into a cab. Twenty minutes later he was at the Grand Central Depot.

That afternoon Frank Reade, Jr., was in the machine shop yard overseeing the hoisting of a derrick, when a diminutive scraping and grinning little negro appeared before him.

"Well, Pomp, what is it?" asked Frank, sharply.

"If yo' please, sah, dere am a gemmen in de office wan's fo' to see yo' sah!"

Frank glanced at the card. The name gave him a start.

"Wallace Dane!"

"It is the Australian!" he exclaimed. "Give him my compliments, Pomp, and tell him I will be right up."

"A'right, sah."

Away bounded the little darky; he dodged around the corner of the shop building when something happened:

A cable lay loosely across his path.

At the other end of it was a genuine specimen of the typical Irishman right from the "ould sod." He grinned and chuckled at sight of the coon.

"Bejabers I'll fix him!" he muttered. Pomp was about to leap over the cable when the Celt gave it a sudden upward pull.

Of course it tripped the negro, and the next moment he stood on his head in a little puddle of dirty water.

Had it been an ordinary mortal the skull would have been crushed.

But everybody knows how proverbially hard a negro's head is anyway. Pomp turned a somersault, and scrambled spluttering and angry to his feet.

Then he saw the Irishman screaming with laughter and holding his sides frantically some distance away.

To say that the coon was mad would be putting it mild.

"Hi, hi, yo' no 'count Tishman!" he yelled. "Wha' fo' yo' do dat? I'se a gret mind to kill yo', Barney O'Shea!"

"Begorra, that's to aven matthers up wid yez!" cried the Celt, heartily. "it's right fer yez!"

"Yo' fink so?" roared Pomp. "I change yo' mind!"

Down went the darky's head and he shot forward like a catapult. Barney was not quick enough to get out of the way.

He went over like a ten pin and the darky scrambled to his feet and ran away from his half senseless tormentor, yelling:

"Hi-hi! I done fix yo' dat time, Tish. I reckon we am somewhere near square now fo' snah."

The two men were faithful servants of Frank Reade, Jr.'s. Their one fault was the propensity to play practical jokes upon each other. It was an even thing between them.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH A BARGAIN IS MADE.

Wallace Dane was waiting eagerly in Frank Reade, Jr.'s office.

He was waiting to meet one of the most famous men of the times, and felt a little nervous.

But the moment Frank crossed the threshold, with a smile and a cheery word of welcome, this vanished. He was at once perfectly at home.

After a few preliminary remarks Dane got down to business.

He gave a graphic story of his life in Australia, and of the wonderful Dry Lake region.

"Now, Mr. Reade," said the Australian, after he had finished, "you have my story, and you know my purpose. I await your decision."

Frank lit a cigar, and puffed it thoughtfully for a few moments.

After some reflection he said:

"Of course you are quite familiar with this region of which you speak? At least you would know in what direction to proceed to find it?"

"I think that I can proceed directly to it."

"You believe that it would be safer and easier to explore that region with the machine than on foot, or in any other way?"

"Certainly!" replied Dane, eagerly. "that is easy enough to see. The Dry Lake region is beset with perils and difficulties not explained in words. The worst foe of the explorer is the lack of good food and water. The native blacks can penetrate that region and live there, for they are trained to live upon snakes, toads, insects or any reptile they can find. The Australian bush native can hardly be classed as a human being."

"I should say not, according to that," declared Frank. "Aboard the Electric Car there would be no danger of such privations."

"There is the idea exactly," cried Dane, eagerly. "the invention which you have perfected makes it possible to completely and safely explore any part of that perilous region!"

"You think there is gold in the Dry Lake?"

"I know it. We have only to reach that spot to bring back a large fortune."

Frank again paced up and down the room reflectively. Suddenly he paused and brought his hand down forcibly upon the table.

"Mr. Dane, I like your scheme!"

A great light of joy broke across the Australian's face.

"I am glad to hear you say that," he said. "I feel more assured of our success now than ever. Then the matter is settled?"

"Yes."

"We will go to Australia?"

"We will."

Dane's voice trembled with eagerness.

"How soon?" he asked.

"Just as soon as we can put the machine aboard a steamer from San Francisco."

"Good!"

"How soon can you be ready?"

"In twelve hours."

Frank touched a bell.

In answer the negro Pomp made his appearance.

"Pomp," said the young inventor, "go down at once to the foreman of the shop, Mr. Carpenter, and tell him to secure four cars for San Francisco at once, in which to pack the sections and effects of the Electric Car."

Pomp ducked his head.

"Golly, Marse Frank," he cried, "am we off so soon?"

"Just as quickly as we can get away," replied Frank.

The negro executed a shuffle.

"Dat jes' suit dis chile," he cried. "Yo' kin bet we'se gwine to be all ready, sah. Whar am it we go, sah?"

"To Australia."

Again the darky ducked his head.

"Berry glad ob dat, sah. I spees dat Barney O'Shea he be glad, too sah! I'm off, sah!"

The door closed behind the coon, and then Dane turned to Frank.

"Is that negro going with us?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Frank. "There will be only four in our party. You and I and my two faithful men, Barney and Pomp."

Dane now produced some maps of Australia and these were discussed at length.

Then the Australian arose.

"I am going right back to New York!" he said. "I have a few little affairs to settle up there. I will be back here in forty-eight hours!"

"Very well," agreed Frank, "that will be in good season."

After the Australian had gone, Frank walked out into the yard of the machine works.

A man approached.

He wore the garb of an artisan and bowed ceremoniously to Frank.

"I received your orders, Mr. Reade," he said. "I have already secured the cars for the transportation of the machine."

Frank nodded in a pleased way.

"Good for you, Carpenter," he said. "It will not take long to pack the Electric Car."

"Twenty hours, sir."

"Very good. Our car will be reserved for the supplies and furnishings. Have four men ready to go along to Melbourne with the machine to put her together there."

"Then you will ship to Melbourne?"

"It is possible. Yet, I may change my mind. However, the first shipment will be to San Francisco!"

"All right, sir!"

"How does she look now that she is completed?"

"Come in and look her over, sir!"

Frank followed the master mechanic into a high roofed building.

Here, resting upon a sort of platform, was the Electric Car.

This was the machine which had created such a stir, and was reputed to be Frank Reade, Jr.'s masterpiece.

Looking at it as it stood upon the platform, it was certainly an imposing vehicle.

A glance was enough to satisfy one that it was a triumph of inventive skill and genius.

The Electric Car was about forty feet in length and in shape was most symmetrical and trim.

The platform or deck of the vehicle was of steel and rested upon an intricate but light running gear.

The wheels were strong but light, and had rubber tires which enabled it to travel almost noiselessly.

Above the deck, which was protected all around by a steel palisade in which were small loop holes, there rose the cabin.

This was oval in shape, of plates of steel, bullet proof and had a dome-like roof.

There were heavy plate glass windows and a door, all protected with steel netting. Forward was the pilot-house, where was the electric key board which governed the electric engines, and also a steering wheel by which either the forward or rear wheels could be manipulated.

There was a small platform and a firing shield or dasher in front of the pilot house. Upon this was mounted the deadly electric gun.

This was Frank Reade, Jr.'s wonderful invention, and was capable of firing a dynamite projectile over a mile with frightful effect.

The interior of the Electric Car was wonderful in detail and equipment.

The little cabin was provided with all the comforts and conveniences which money could procure.

There were soft divans, elegant couches, beautiful hangings and bric-a-brac.

There were six fine staterooms comfortably equipped; also a dining-hall and cooking galley.

Forward there was placed the electric engine room. Here were the powerful dynamos and the wonderful electric machinery—all worked upon a storage system which Frank had invented and held as a secret.

Representatives of many governments had offered him large sums for the secret, but in all cases he had refused to sell it.

This completes a meager description of the Electric Car, and now, with the reader's kind permission, we will hasten on to exciting incidents of our story.

Promptly Wallace Dane returned from New York all equipped for his journey to Australia.

The special train waited on the track in Readestown ready for the word to depart.

A great throng of people gathered about the railroad station.

Frank was very popular in his own town, as well as elsewhere, and was called upon to make a speech. He did this in a graceful manner.

And so, loaded down with honors and the best wishes of everybody, the young inventor started upon his famous trip to Australia.

The special train rolled out of Readestown on its way to San Francisco.

Barney and Pomp were supremely happy. Nothing suited them so well as to be off on a trip of adventure.

The trip to San Francisco was made safely and quickly.

The people of the Golden Gate had already received news of the exploring party, and a large number of them turned out to welcome them.

The steamer Occania was to convey the Electric Car and its travelers across the vast Pacific.

Barney looked out upon the mighty rolling expanse of the Pacific, and after some thought said:

"Bejabers, its a moighty lot av wather an' divil a bit av it good to dhrink! Shure, it's a long ways across it in any direction, an' if I was at the bottom av it I'd niver ixpect to see the top. It's on the top I'll stay, bad cess to it, an' a moighty foine day it'll be whin we land in Australia. Shure, give me the land, fer thin yez know where yez are, but whin yez are on the say yez are niver knowin' where yez are. Whurroo!"

Pomp was less philosophical and more anxious. He rubbed his stomach dismally and muttered:

"Golly, I don' jes' know whether I'll collapse on dis yer v'yage or not. Don' like de roll ob dem waves fo' a cent! Drefful good tings to eat abo'd dem ocean steamers, but kain't say dat does me much good. I reckon I be glad when I see de blessed lan' agin!"

From these remarks it can be inferred that Barney's bugaboo fear of being drowned was hardly stronger than Pomp's dread of the unpleasant mal-de-mer.

CHAPTER III.

THE OCEAN STORM.

Australia!

To the traveler and explorer, to the genuine globe trotter, there exists in this name a veritable charm.

Few there are, fond of wild adventure and incident, but have at one time or another experienced a keen desire to visit Australia.

It can therefore be understood with what eager anticipations our travelers looked forward to the termination of their voyage.

When the circumstances are considered this is little to be wondered at.

They were going to penetrate the unexplored parts of the most wonderful continent on earth with the Electric Car, and upon conditions of almost absolute safety.

On board this famous machine with plenty of provisions for an indefinite length of time, and assured of protection from the elements and the weapons of an enemy, truly they had much to look forward to.

Perhaps the most delighted one in the party was Dane.

He was nervously anxious to reach the end of the voyage and could hardly contain himself.

"I tell you we shall be repaid!" he declared vehemently. "Ye gods! what a lucky man I am! I shall be the envied of the whole of Australia's miners and adventurers!"

"I hope our trip will be a success," said Frank.

"A success!" exclaimed Dane, excitedly. "Of course it will! It cannot possibly fail! That is out of the question, be sure!"

"Then you think we had better not go to Melbourne?" asked Frank.

"Why, it is not necessary," replied Dane: "this steamer will stop at Brisbane. From there we can strike directly across Queensland to Tasman Land."

"We will abide by your judgment."

"A glance at the map will show that this is the proper course. If we go to Melbourne it will be a much longer voyage and a longer road to travel. By all means let us disembark at Brisbane."

So it was settled.

The *Oceania* encountered no very serious storms or setbacks on her way to the Antipodes.

One day a coast showed upon the western horizon. Studying it with his glass, the captain declared:

"That is New Guinea. We are well on our way across the Coral Sea."

The voyage now became one of some risk.

There were many groups of atolls and sunken reefs to be avoided, and these often lay directly in the vessel's course.

But the captain was a very careful man, a good seaman and used to these waters.

He skilfully avoided all danger until they had reached a point south of the Horse Shoe Shoals and near the 22d degree of south latitude.

Then one day he pointed to the western horizon, and said:

"One hundred miles over there are the Great Barrier Reefs; six degrees more of latitude will bring us to Brisbane."

"Good!" cried Frank. "We shall soon be able to begin our inland journey there."

"I believe it."

But the words were barely out of the captain's mouth when down from the cross-tree came the hail:

"Deck ahoy!"

"Ahoy," replied the captain.

"A hurricane coming, sir, from the southeast," replied the lookout.

"A hurricane!" gasped the captain.

Then his face paled.

He as well as the others knew what this meant in those waters: it required only a keen glance at a point between the sea and sky to show that the lookout was right.

The horizon was shaded by a long yellow line, ominous and swiftly rising to the zenith.

The light of the sun had paled; it was evident that the hurricane was bound to come.

A distant dull booming was now heard, good evidence of the force of the deadly storm.

The hurricane, or typhoon, as it was known, was a fearful thing to face. The captain of the *Oceania* hurried below.

In a few minutes he returned and gave sharp orders to the crew. They began at once to make things ship-shape,

and all steam was put on, while the steamer was run due west.

The captain explained his purpose in this a little later.

"I want to get inside the Barrier Reefs," he said. "If I can succeed in that we shall be all right, for we can laugh at the storm."

"How far distant are they?" asked Dane anxiously.

"About fifty miles."

"Can we make them?"

"I think so. The storm is yet three hours away. I think we will just about do it. Then I can make my way south through the Capricorn Channel in comparatively smooth water."

The intensity of the emotions of the explorers can well be imagined.

Certainly the success of their expedition hung in the balance.

Unless they could reach Brisbane safely, or get the electric car on land, the whole expedition must turn out a failure.

The captain was anxious but confident.

"We shall do it," he said, as he constantly consulted the barometer.

At the end of the first hour a strong head wind was blowing. The sea was nasty and choppy.

And yet the steamer sped on.

Her boilers were heated to their utmost, and her funnels sent out huge volumes of smoke.

At the termination of the second hour the barometer showed a rapid change, evidence that the storm was near at hand.

Great squally gusts came across the water and made the ship creak.

Still the captain paced his quarter deck and clung to his mad hope.

"I declare," muttered Dane, who had once been a sailor. "I can't say that I exactly agree with the old captain. I believe I should have stood out to sea and met the storm."

"Would not that have been at the risk of wreck?" asked Frank.

"I don't think so. She is a very staunch vessel. It would not be great odds that she would fight the battle out bravely!"

"Is it too late to turn back now?"

"I fear so. You see the storm would blow her back in spite of everything for forty or fifty miles, if it did not last over six hours. At present that would take us onto the Barrier Reefs in less than an hour."

"Mercy on us!" cried Frank. "I hope the captain is taking no undue risks?"

"I hope not. We will trust to good fortune."

"You seem to understand nautical affairs well?"

"I ought to. I was once master of a brig sailing from Melbourne."

"Then why not go to the captain and urge your theories?"

Dane laughed.

"It is evident that you do not understand sea captains," he said. "They will never stand interference. The best thing to do is to let our captain alone. He may succeed."

"Let us pray for it."

But the aspect was fast growing threatening. The reefs had not yet been sighted, and it was hardly likely they would be in such a sea.

The waves were now running heavier, and beat upon the sides of the ship like huge battering rams trying to batter her staunch timbers in.

Still on the Oceania kept her mad pace.

But long before the lookout came down from the cross-tree for safety it was evident that the captain's plan was to fail.

The storm must break before the reefs were reached.

In this event the most serious of results threatened.

At this critical stage the captain lost his nerve.

He broke down and sniveled like a child. In this contingency the first mate was obliged to take the bridge.

A quick council was held, in which passengers and crew all took part. Wallace, however, was disposed to hold aloof.

There were two questions to consider—whether it was best to risk passing between the reefs or standing out to sea to meet the storm.

The latter seemed the forlorn hope. The former was almost certain death.

So the crew decided.

At this moment Wallace put in a word.

"It is folly!" he cried excitedly. "You will only go to your death! The sea will beat you right back! There is only one chance for the ship, and that is to ride over the reefs!"

"And there they are!" cried one of the crew.

All eyes were turned westward.

Sure enough, there was the long line of calmer sea which lay beyond the reefs.

These latter of course could not be seen, for they were lightly covered by the water, making them the most treacherous foe of the mariner.

There was now no recourse but to venture crossing them.

At intervals there were small, deep channels. If the ship should strike one of these she would go over all right and safely.

But if not—then she must be stove upon the ragged coral ledge.

It was taking a mighty chance. But nothing else could be done, as there was not time to bring the ship about.

The mate went to the wheel and the ship bore down for the reefs like a race horse.

Then the storm broke. The ship was lifted as if by a giant and hurled over the great barrier.

It was a moment of great intensity. Then all on board felt a sudden shock, a rending and grating, and the next moment the Oceania was in the calmer sea.

She had crossed the reef, but one terrible recollection was in the minds of all.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRIP WELL BEGUN.

The Oceania had crossed the reef. But she had also struck it in going over.

Had it made a hole in her bottom or opened a seam?

If so, then her fate was sealed. With much suspense word was awaited from the mate, who went down into the hold.

When he came up his face was very pallid.

"She is making water fast," he said, hoarsely. "Man the pumps!"

For hours the pumps were worked steadily while the ship worked in through the channels until she made a small bay in the coast line.

Here she hove to and anchor was dropped.

It was a lonely part of the Australian coast. There was no sign of human habitation.

Indeed Wallace declared that civilization was many miles distant.

"We are a good ways from Brisbane!" he said. "The steamer will never reach there."

Frank Reade, Jr., looked dismayed.

"Then our trip is to be a failure," he said. "We shall never see the interior of Australia."

"Why not?" asked Dane, brusquely.

"Why, if the ship goes down the Electric Car will go with her. Without the car we are unable to carry out our purpose."

"Why let the ship sink?"

"Can she be saved?"

"From being lost—no! But we can drive her onto the beach and then take the machine off on a raft."

Frank gave a quick start.

"Will the crew consent?" he asked.

"I will talk with them."

So another consultation was held. The result was that the crew of the steamer agreed to the beaching of the Oceania.

Frank and Dane offered to pay them well to assist in unloading the Electric Car.

Then in the ship's boats they could easily make their way down the Capricorn Channel to Brisbane.

A good spot was selected and the pumps were abandoned while all steam was put on.

The Oceania, driven at full speed, ran a fifth of her length out upon a yielding sand-bar. There she rested easy.

Her rear end settled fast, but fortunately the Electric Car was packed in the forward hold.

The next day the storm abated, and then the work of disembarkation begun.

It was carried forward rapidly under Dane's supervision.

In a few hours the sections of the car were all safely on shore, and were hoisted over the high cliffs.

From the cliffs a good view of a wild country was seen.

A barren, desolate plain extended as far as the eye could reach.

Here upon the cliffs the Electric Car was quickly set up. Then the provisions and equipments were placed aboard of her.

She was all ready for her great trip into the interior.

In spite of the wreck of the Oceania she was saved, and was yet to carry out the fond dream of her creator.

So exuberant did the four explorers feel that they were constrained to vent it in a cheer.

The crew of the Oceania now fitted out their boats and started for Brisbane.

The parting was marked with cheers and much demonstration. Then our voyagers turned to face the perils of an unexplored region.

Much of an exciting character was before them.

All sprung aboard.

They took a last look at the wreck of the Oceania.

Then Frank went into the pilot-house, threw off the brakes, started the electric engines, and the Electric Car moved away.

The search for the Great Dry Lake had begun.

Time was to tell what the results would be. Everybody hoped for the best.

Away over the plain rolled the Electric Car.

From a clump of palms a couple of emus were startled. Some antelope fled before the new visitors.

And in a hollow of the plain the curious marsupial population of Australia found representatives which also fled with great bounds.

These kangaroos Dane declared to be the largest he had ever seen.

"You may make sure," he said, "that this part of the country has never been visited before by white men."

This excited the interest of all.

That they were traveling a new and unexplored region was certainly a matter worthy of note.

At every turn some new feature of interest manifested itself.

The machine, bowling along at a rapid rate, soon left the coast far behind.

Fifty miles were run into the interior before the country began to undergo a change.

Two mountains high and rugged rose in their course.

"We must look for a pass," said Dane.

"Will that be not difficult to find wide enough to admit of the passage of the machine?" asked Frank.

"I think not!"

"That looks like one yonder!"

"So it does!"

It ascended quite steeply for several miles, and the course was not altogether smooth.

But from this height a mighty view of the country could be had.

The car pushed on until the greatest height in the defile was reached.

The scenery was something wonderful beyond description. On either side perpendicular walls rose to the height of thousands of feet.

But at this juncture the pass converged, making a width barely enough to allow the passage of the Electric Car.

And what was more, an obstacle of some account was here encountered.

It was a huge boulder, and it completely occupied the space between the walls.

To move it was not very easy. The Car came to a halt.

Dane looked blank.

"By the horn spoon!" he muttered, "how are we going to get around that?"

"It is not easy!" said Frank.

"Must we turn back?"

"By no means."

"Can you suggest a way to remove that obstacle?" he asked.

"I can!" replied Frank.

"How?"

"I'll show you."

The Car was backed away from the boulder about a thousand feet. Then Frank went onto the forward platform.

He trained the electric gun to bear upon the boulder. Dane saw his purpose at once.

"Aha!" he exclaimed. "You are going to try the dynamite?"

"Yes."

"Do you think it will do it?"

"You shall see."

The young inventor placed a projectile in the breech. Then he adjusted the sight.

His aim was to strike the boulder at its base.

One moment he hesitated and then pressed the electric lever. There was a shock and a recoil.

The dynamite shell struck the boulder beyond all doubt. What followed was wonderful to behold.

There was a terrific roar and a commotion.

It was as if an earthquake had convulsed the vicinity. The air was filled with flying dust and particles of stone.

Then all subsided. The dust cleared away and—presto! the scene was a peculiar one.

The boulder was gone.

It had been reduced to small particles and these were scattered everywhere. Some were lodged as high as one hundred feet in crevices of the cliff above.

The pass was cleared as if by magic for the passage of the car. It was a wonderful transformation.

Dane stood for a moment spellbound.

"Well, I never!" he muttered, "that beats me out and out. I never saw the equal of that."

Frank laughed quietly.

"The power of dynamite is great," he said.

"So is the power of invention," rejoined Dane.

The Electric Car now went on. The pass widened beyond this point to a great degree.

And now a new incident occurred to relieve the monotony. Thus far nothing had been seen of any sign of human life.

Frank noted this.

"Have all the bushmen absented themselves?" he asked.

"I would not be surprised if you should find out that we are surrounded by them," said Dane.

"Surrounded?"

"Yes."

"Impossible!"

"Don't be so sure!"

"Why, we have not seen a sign of them."

"Which is only the more conclusive proof that they are all about us. Just the time when you don't see a black is the very time to look for him."

"They are cunning fellows!"

"Well, you may be sure."

"Have we anything to fear from them?" asked Frank.

"We have much to fear from them. They are constantly on the alert. They are armed with poisoned darts which they throw with unerring aim. Once one is struck by one of these his career is at an end."

"Indeed! then it will hardly be safe on any exposed part of the deck?"

"Never safe. We must be constantly on guard. Ah!"

A most astounding thing occurred at that moment.

It cut short the conversation of the two men, and served as a warning they could not disregard.

CHAPTER V.

AN AUSTRALIAN STORM.

The pilot house window and steel shutter were open to admit air.

Through this open space there suddenly sped an object which hurtled against the opposite wall and fell clanging to the floor.

It was a javelin about two feet long with a weighted handle. Only an expert hand threw it.

It had just grazed Frank's temple. A closer call could hardly be imagined.

"On my word," cried Dane, with fright, "that is a warning! Down, Frank—down, quick!"

Both sank to the floor of the pilot house. Frank touched a spring which closed the shutter.

Not a moment too soon.

Another javelin rang against the steel blind.

But looking from the window not a sign of the foe could be seen, which was mysterious.

"They had me marked that time!" cried Frank.

"They surely meant to kill you!"

"Luck is mine!"

"Ah, indeed!"

Frank examined the javelin with some curiosity; then he said:

"But I doubt if this would have killed me."

Dane looked up in surprise.

"You doubt it, eh?"

"I must say that I do."

"Let me see the javelin."

Dane examined its point critically: then he said:

"Why do you think that you could have survived the blow of this javelin?"

"It is a weak and puny weapon: it is not heavy enough to do one much harm."

"Ah, that is just where you are wrong," declared Dane; "the tip of this javelin is most thoroughly saturated with poison."

"Poison!"

"Yes, sir!"

Frank experienced a chill.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed, "then my escape was indeed a narrow one!"

"You can reckon it as such. Now I must warn you all against going out on the platform or in any way exposing yourselves—it may mean death."

Barney and Pomp were called and warned.

"Golly!" muttered Pomp, with a shrug of his shoulders. "kain't say dat I am jes' afraid ob a bullet, but I se no match fo' a poisoned dart—dat am a fac', sah!"

"Begorra, I'm wid yez there, naygur!" declared Barney.

The machine, meanwhile, had been slowly moving onward.

Suddenly Dane grabbed his rifle.

"What is it?" asked Frank.

"Keep cool," whispered the Australian. "It ain't often you can kill a bush black, but I think I see a chance now."

"Where?" asked Frank blankly.

"Keep your eye on that tuft of bush about twenty feet up the wall. We shall pass quite near it."

"Well?"

"There's a bush native up there, and he's got his poisoned darts ready for us. Be sure of it!"

Dane went to a loophole and waited until the Car had reached a certain angle.

Then he took aim quickly and fired into the bush.

The result was surprising.

There was a yell of agony and out shot a human form. It went hurtling down to the bed of the pass.

The shot was a fatal one. The black was dead.

The Car ran alongside the dead native and the travelers took a look at him. He was a magnificent specimen of the bushman.

His form was sinewy and powerful. His black matted

hair hung down over his shoulders. His skin was a chocolate brown.

He was only slightly dressed with a breech clout and skin mantle. But he carried a sheaf of the poison darts.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Frank, "he would be a bad chap to meet at close quarters!"

"Indeed, yes!" agreed Dane.

The Car went on down the defile. Not a sign was seen of another bushman, and Frank ventured to say:

"Perhaps this is such a lesson to them that they had better let the Electric Car alone."

"Humph!" exclaimed Dane. "don't deceive yourself. They will never abandon their purpose of revenge. Kill a bushman and his colleagues will hunt you as long as you remain on Australian soil."

Frank shrugged his shoulders.

"Let us get out of this locality!" he cried.

He sent the Car forward at increased speed. There were now indications that they were nearing the end of the pass.

Dane called this range of mountains the Grosvenor Range and said:

"Beyond these mountains is the valley of the Suttar River. It is quite apt to be dry at this time of year."

"Like the Great Dry Lake," said Frank.

"Exactly! after crossing the Suttar River, we shall come to the Cape River diggings. It is one of the richest gold fields in this part of the world."

"We will stop there for a while," said Frank.

"I am agreeable."

On through the mountain pass the car rolled. After a time the high walls of granite began to open and it was certain that they were rapidly approaching an open country.

The pass now trended downward.

For several miles the car ran down over the hard rocky floor. Then of a sudden the open country burst into view.

The sight was so pleasing that our adventurers could not help a cheer. As far as the eye could reach there extended fertile green plains.

These were dotted with clumps of timber. A river wound its silver course through the green expanse.

"Suttar Plains," declared Dane: "it is a good ways across there. We will hardly make it in a day."

"A day!" exclaimed Frank, incredulously. "A few hours will do it!"

"No, I assure you," said Dane earnestly: "the atmosphere is deceptive. It is much further than it looks to be."

Darkness was already near at hand. The sun had set far beyond the western horizon.

To travel after dark was, of course, possible, with the aid of the search-light.

But Frank decided not to do so, but to camp.

The machine was brought to a stop at the foot of the Grosvenor Mountains. Then Pomp called up from the galley:

"Supper am ready. If yo' want anything to eat, now is yo' time."

All were hungry and eagerly accepted the invitation.

Down the stairs they scrambled, and soon the toothsome repast was before them.

Pomp was a fine cook, and it is needless to say that all did justice to his skill.

After the evening meal all gathered in the main cabin.

The electric lights made a good radius about the car, and no foe could have ventured within it without being seen.

So they felt secure enough. The hearty meal had added to the spirit of all and they proceeded to make the evening merry.

Barney and Pomp could always be depended upon to furnish their quota of the entertainment.

And they acquitted themselves right nobly.

Pomp produced from some mysterious source a banjo and a pair of bones. At either of these he was an adept.

So he proceeded to furnish plantation melodies galore. He was also a good singer.

Barney, not to be outdone, appeared on the scene with a genuine Irish fiddle.

He could wring most extraordinary music from this. All manner of Irish airs were played and he sang like an ancient minstrel.

Dane was delighted and also furnished his quota. He had once trod the boards and was a good elocutionist.

So the first evening of their stay in Australia was passed. Then at a late hour bed was thought of.

Pomp was to keep watch the first half of the night and Barney the latter.

Soon the darky was left alone.

But nothing occurred during the night to disturb the sleepers. Morning came and found a storm brewing.

Thunder rolled among the mountain crags and peaks, and lightning played in vivid flashes. Rain soon began to fall in torrents.

Frank was for starting right out, but Dane objected.

"It will be folly," he cried. "Indeed, I cannot say that it would not be fatal. There are many soft morasses on that plain, and if we should run into one it would be the end of us and of the machine."

"Indeed," exclaimed Frank apprehensively, "that would be serious! I shall take your advice, Mr. Dane."

So all prepared themselves for a longer sojourn in the shadow of the Grosvenor Mountains.

It was the first Australian storm that our voyagers, save Dane, of course, had seen.

It was of a character which they were quite likely not soon to forget.

Trees were uprooted, the plain became a lake, and had the machine not been in a sheltered spot, much damage might have been done to it.

For six hours the storm lasted. When it did break away the sun came out with tropical fierceness.

The voyagers were glad enough to keep in the shade and avoid the heated mists which rose from the plain.

In those mists, Dane declared, many deadly fevers lurked. These it was of course best to avoid.

Another night was passed on Grosvenor Mountains, and it was the noon of the second day before the Electric Car could go on its way.

Then Frank started the machinery only to meet with an astounding surprise.

The dynamos buzzed, the car shook and throbbed, but the wheels did not move. What had happened? What was the trouble?

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIGHT WITH THE BUSHMEN.

To say that Frank was surprised would be a mild statement.

"What the deuce is wrong?" he cried. "The machinery acts all right, but we don't move."

Dane stood silently by the pilot house. His face was the color of marble.

"P'raps dar am somefin undah de wheels, Marse Frank?" ventured Pomp.

"Like enough," exclaimed the young inventor, "let me see."

He was about to open the door and step out upon deck, but Dane put a hand on his arm.

"Hold!" he said rigidly.

"What?" exclaimed Frank.

"Where are you going?"

"Outside, to look at the wheels."

"No, you are not."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you are not going out there to die."

"To die?"

"Yes; the man who steps out of that door will expose himself to instant death; I know what I am talking about!"

"The bushmen!"

"Yes!"

"But—you don't think they are the cause of the machine's trouble?"

"I do!"

"But how could they trig the wheels! We have kept the closest of guard all the while."

"Humph!" said the Australian; "you don't know the bushman! He is almost omnipresent. He is so silent and so cunning as to be almost invisible. He is a deadly foe!"

"Well, I never," exclaimed Frank. "What have they done to the wheels, think you?"

"I cannot imagine. Is there no way of getting a safe look at them?"

"Yes!" cried Frank, "from the dynamo pit! That is next the ground and there is a little trap door. But what can be their purpose?"

"That is not exactly plain yet. It does not seem possible that they mean to attack us openly. Bush rangers do not fight that way."

"Well," said Frank, "let us first take a look at their work. They were shrewd, indeed, to crawl under this machine without our seeing them."

Down into the wagon pit went the two men.

A glance through the trap door showed them a startling state of affairs.

The wheels and all the running gear of the machine were literally tied up in a net-work of ropes. It was a most extraordinary spectacle.

In some way these cunning rascals had thus literally anchored the Car.

There was not power enough in the electric machinery to break these ties. The Car was held firm.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Frank, "that beats anything I ever saw!"

"They have done their work well," said Dane, "and as only bushmen can!"

"I believe you," replied Frank, "but we must break those ropes!"

"By all means!"

"But how can we do it? Will it be safe for one of us to get down there and cut them?"

"Not for a moment!" replied Dane, with a shrug of the shoulders, "it would be certain death."

"Then you think I would be within range under there?"

"You may be sure of it. Yonder copse, beyond doubt, holds a number of the foe all ready to fire the deadly poisoned dart."

Frank shut his teeth rigidly.

"If that is the case," he said, "we will see if we cannot clear them out of there. I will blow up the whole country about here, but I will drive them out."

"With the electric gun?"

"Yes."

Dane looked doubtful.

"I don't believe you will drive them out even in that way," he said, "they are almost spiritual in their hiding powers!"

"We'll see!" muttered the young inventor, as he started up the stairs.

He was certainly in earnest in what he said.

He would blow up every hiding place about with the dynamite shells. In this way he felt sure that he could make the coast clear.

So he started for the pilot house and the gun shield. But at that moment a wild cry rang through the cabin.

"Och, Misther Frank! fer the love av Heaven come quick and see what the omadhauns are up to. Shure it's to crush us they mean!"

Frank sprung into the pilot-house, where Barney with chattering teeth pointed to a point on the mountain side above.

All in the party gazed in that direction and the sight which they beheld made their hearts stand still.

"Heaven help us!"

"Massy sakes!" groaned Pomp. "We'se done fo' dis time!"

"On me worrud!" averred Barney, with ghastly face. "they will smash us intoirely, Misther Frank!"

The sight which caused these exclamations was indeed a thrilling one.

High up the precipitous steep, lodged in the mountain wall, was a huge boulder.

Back of this were a number of dark forms digging rapidly. The boulder was trembling and seemingly on the point of coming down the mountain side.

The purpose of the bushrangers was plain.

They certainly meant to precipitate the boulder down upon the Electric Car and crush it.

For a moment Frank stood like one petrified.

He saw the deadly peril and the almost absolute certainty of annihilation.

If the boulder should descend upon the car it would completely demolish it.

Already the huge stone was wavering. It was certain to descend.

Suddenly a great cry went up.

"Here she comes!"

The boulder had started on its downward course. With a great leap it cleared a mighty precipice and raced down the green slope.

The voyagers crouched in the cabin aghast and waiting their apparent fate without the power to resist it.

That its aim was true there was no manner of doubt. It was certain to strike the machine.

But Frank Reade, Jr., had conceived a plan of action and he was not an instant in executing it.

He knew that there was only one agency in his power which would arrest the descent of the rock.

He hastened to employ it.

His eye crossed the sight of the gun.

It followed the course of the boulder. There was a question of accurate judgment and precision of calculation.

But Frank was equal to these. He drew a deep, quick breath and pressed the electric button.

There was a sudden recoil, a shock as the pneumatic tube worked. The projectile or shell was hurled from the gun's muzzle.

What followed was marvelous.

The shell struck the boulder squarely at its base. There was a terrific roar, a lightning like blaze and the ground trembled.

The huge boulder as if struck a blow by the hammer of Titan, split into four fragments.

Each took a different course and not one toward the Car. The day was saved.

For a moment absolute silence reigned in the cabin of the Car.

Then pent up feelings expressed themselves. There was a spontaneous outburst.

Dane and Barney and Pomp gave wild cheers, and then rushed up and hugged Frank vehemently.

"We owe you our lives, Frank!" cried Dane wildly.

"It was the only way to avert the catastrophe," said the young inventor coolly.

"Indeed you are right."

What effect the shot had upon the bushrangers it was not easy to tell, for not one of them was to be seen anywhere.

Frank now proceeded to send shells into every visible covert. He kept this up until satisfied that no human being was within range.

Then Barney descended by means of the dynamo pit, and cut every rope which bound the running gear.

The machine started away at a rapid gait, and the Grosvenor range was left behind.

Out into the plain rolled the Car.

Frank took a last look at the mountains and cried:

"Good-bye to that retreat of assassins! Good-bye to the bushmen!"

"Don't say that yet!" cried Dane.

"Why?"

"You are premature. We shall not succeed in getting away from those fellows until we leave Australian soil."

Frank was astonished.

"How can they keep up with the car?" he asked. "That is impossible, sir."

"Not a bit of it."

"But they cannot travel so fast."

"They will be traveling while we are lying still. You may be sure that they are hot upon our trail now. They know short cuts and nearer courses by which they will manage to keep up with us."

Frank shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't say that I like the idea," he declared; "they are the curse of this region."

"So they are!" agreed Dane, "but for them Australia would have been settled up much faster."

"Warfare should be made upon them!" declared Frank, "and if they will not come to terms exterminate them!"

"That would be impossible. They have a mode of living which baffles all attempts at extinction. They cannot be trailed, they cannot be hunted, for they are too shrewd, and hunt for those who hunt them. They are in their way invincible."

The Car kept on for many miles over a level plain.

It was easy running until one day Dane came up on deck and shouted in his cheery way:

"Well, my friend, we are getting well along on our journey. Yonder is the Suttar River."

CHAPTER VII.

THE RABBIT PLAINS.

Dane pointed to the westward; all looked in that direction.

They were puzzled.

There was a depression and a sandy streak, but no sign of water in view anywhere.

"Where is the river?" asked Frank, in surprise.

"Down yonder!"

"I see no river."

"Oh, I see what you mean!" cried Dane, with a laugh.

"You were looking for water."

"Certainly!"

"Well, let me explain that all Australian rivers do not have water in them."

Frank laughed.

"I also supposed that water was essential to make a river."

"Not in the Antipodes," replied Dane, soberly. "All Australian rivers are dry most of the year."

"What do travelers do for water?"

"Oh, it may be obtained by digging down a few feet in the bed of the stream. The explanation commonly accepted is that the porous nature of the soil carries the river underground, except in time of the spring freshets.

"At such a time it is difficult to travel, for bridges are unknown, and almost unnecessary, so little occasion is there to use them."

"But the fish!" asked Frank. "What becomes of them?"

"They simply slide down into the sea with the falling waters. Fishing is fine sport in Australia when the rivers are full!"

"Humph!" said Frank. "Give me America."

"Well, in some respects Australia excels America," contended Dane.

Frank was not disposed to argue, and now they came to the channel of the Suttar River.

The Suttar was left behind them, and now the region began to undergo a change.

They came to the most desolate plain they had ever seen.

It was infested with millions of cotton tail rabbits, and their burrows were like stars in the sky. These animals are the curse of Australia.

Everything has been done to exterminate them, but their progeny multiply so rapidly that this has been found a hopeless task.

The rabbit devastates the country of everything in the line of vegetation and gives nothing back. Wherever Mr. Jack Rabbit has succeeded in establishing his burrows there is no chance for human sustenance.

For many miles the rabbit plains extended upon all hands.

Our adventurers followed their course, the machine running over the burrows in a merciless manner.

For a time Barney and Pomp amused themselves trying fancy shots at the rabbits from the deck.

But this soon proved a waste of ammunition, and the futility of exterminating the pest in this manner was easily seen.

"Begorra, wan cud get enough rabbit skins here fer to put a blanket over the whole av Ameriky," declared Barney, rashly.

"Golly! I done tink yo' am about right, Fish," asseverated Pomp.

"Av course I'm roight! Don't yez know that?" blustered the Celt.

But Frank's appearance at this moment put an end to whatever argument might have ensued.

Until darkness came the machine ran on over the rabbit plain.

Then Dane said dubiously:

"I'm afraid we've got to camp among the Jacks, Frank."

"Well," said the young inventor, "if it must be so, all right."

"Humph! I don't know about that."

"Why not?"

"These rabbits are apt to eat us up, machine and all, before morning," said the Australian. "I'm not a bit afraid to wager they'll eat the tires off the wheels."

"Well," said Frank, facetiously, "if that is the case, we had better make a provision for safety. Suppose we encircle the machine with electric wires. They will hardly care to go against them."

"Which is a good plan," declared Dane, "that will also keep other prowling beasts away. I approve of it."

The Electric Car came to a stop in the rabbit plain, and preparations were at once made for spending the night there.

At first the rabbits scurried away in affright.

But after a while they recovered themselves and came back, timidly at first, but bolder afterward.

There were thousands of them soon hopping about the plain.

While it did not seem possible that they could do the mar-

chine any harm, Frank was nevertheless determined to put out the electric wires.

And he did so.

The result was curious.

The rabbits, naturally curious as to what the new visitor was, came trooping up against the heavily charged wires.

As a matter of consequence dead rabbits began to pile up with wonderful rapidity.

In a few moments the wires had killed hundreds, and yet they still came on.

Frank was dismayed.

"I don't know about this," he cried. "I am afraid it isn't going to work."

"Why?" asked Dane, with a laugh.

"We shall soon be surrounded by such a wall of these creatures that we will be buried by them. It will be difficult for the Car to cut its way through them now!"

"Indeed! I believe you're right!" agreed the Australian. "After all, the best thing to do with the rabbits is to let them alone!"

"I agree with you."

"If they overrun the Car they can do no special harm."

"That is true. I believe I will shut off the current."

"I would."

And this Frank did. Then Barney was left on guard in the pilothouse, while the others retired.

Every window and door was closed, air being admitted by the ventilator screens. The rabbits at least could not penetrate the cabin.

They did come aboard the Car and piled upon the deck in hundreds. But finally, finding nothing to eat, they retired squealing and fighting to their burrows.

When morning came the journey was resumed across the rabbit plain.

Half a day brought the party to the end of it and to the verge of a high plateau.

Here the country underwent a change.

They came to a well watered valley and a lively river, whose course as an exception was not dry.

"The Cape River!" declared Dane, "this is the gold country of Queensland!"

As the machine ran on, they came suddenly to signal poles and a trail.

"The Cape River trail!" declared Dane. "We are not fifty miles from the diggings."

"Then you really mean that gold is dug in this region?" asked Frank, in surprise.

"I do!" replied Dane, "and gold is found generally in nuggets of various sizes. Everybody knows what Australian gold is."

"Indeed, yes, but the soil did not seem to me to be auriferous enough."

"Ah, but that is deceptive. Remove that sod and six inches of loam and you will find the auriferous deposit. There is a vast drift in this region!"

All were deeply interested.

The visit to the mining camp was looked forward to with much pleasure.

"I'll bet the boys will be astonished at sight of this machine," cried Dane. "None of 'em ever saw anything like it."

At this moment Barney, who was on lookout in the pilothouse, cried:

"Bogorra, Misther Frank, yonder is a man on horseback."

"Indeed!" cried Frank, in surprise, "the first civilized man we have met."

All rushed out on deck.

There was no danger of bushmen and their poison darts on this open plain. The horseman was distant about a mile.

With a glass his personnel could be plainly seen.

He was of the type of Australian herder, with rough garb, broad hat, long whip, and bestrode one of the hardy little horses indigenous to the country.

He had reined in his horse and was evidently regarding the machine with amazement.

By Frank's direction Barney turned the car in his direction.

It did not require but a brief while to run that mile, and the herder sat upon his horse statuelike until the car came up.

Frank was on deck, and as the car stopped he shouted:

"Hello, stranger!"

"Hello!" replied the herder, making his horse cavort. "Who in the name of sandwiches air you?"

"I am Frank Reade, Jr., an American, and this is my Electric Car," replied Frank.

The fellow gave vent to a long drawn whistle.

"Wall, I never!" he exclaimed, rubbing his eyes. "You are an American, eh?"

"Yes."

"Wall, I'd swear yew wuz nothin' else. Nobody else could travel around in a house on wheels and make it go without horses. How do you make it travel alone anyway?"

"By means of electric dynamos," replied Frank.

"Electricity, eh? That's that queer new invention that will knock a man stiff if he puts his hand onto it, eh?"

"Yes."

"Whew! I reekin I'll keep my hands offen it. How did ye git hyer, friend? Didn't come across ther Pacific in that, did ye?"

"No!" replied Frank. "We came over on the steamer Oceania, which was driven ashore by a storm on the Barrier Reefs."

"Cum over in a steamer, eh? How far are ye goin' this way?"

"We are going to the Great Dry Lake region," replied Frank.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT CAPE DIGGINGS.

The fellow gave a violent start.

"What's that?" he exclaimed, "ther Dry Lake kentry?"

"Yes."

"Wall, do you expect to git thar?"

"We hope to."

"Thar's a heap of good men hev tried it an' gone busted."

"They did not have the facilities which we possess. I can tell you we shall get there."

"Do ye know whar ye are now?" asked the fellow.

"We are on the Cape River."

"Kereet. Ther big diggings an' ther camp are only ten miles above here. I'm jest down from there."

"Good!" cried Frank. "Perhaps you can direct us how to get there?"

"I'm goin' thar myself, an' if you're not particular I'll go along with you."

"Good!" cried Frank again; "that will be a kind favor."

Then he turned to Dane and whispered:

"Can we trust this fellow?"

"I don't see why," replied the Australian gold hunter slowly; "he looks like an honest man. I say, friend!"

"Well?" returned the herder.

"What's your name?"

"Sike Jackson."

"What's your layout?"

"I'm just from Col. Archibald's range, whar I've been boss herder fer six years. Got ther gold fever, quit work an' cum down here; wish I was back again."

"Which shows your good sense; get down from your horse and have a glass of flip."

"Thanks; don't keer if I do!"

Jackson descended with alacrity.

In another moment he had sprung onto the deck of the car. Pomp brought up the flip.

Jackson grew loquacious now and proceeded to make free with his new acquaintances.

Dane took him over the machine to his intense interest.

All the while he plied him with questions, which Jackson readily answered.

"They're a queer lot up in Cape Diggin's," he said. "It's keep your eye on your purse up there. There's been a heap of thievin' done there lately. One man found a twenty thousand dollar nugget. The next day he was found in his camp with his throat cut, and the nugget was gone."

"Then they are a lot of thugs?"

"Not all on 'em. There are good men there. Now there's Jack Danby as keeps the hotel. He's right up and up square. He's offered a big reward for the capture of old Preston's murderer."

"Good for him!"

"Yes; but the tough gang are after him now. Jack has to sleep with a revolver in his teeth. He's apt to be called away any time."

"He is certainly plucky."

"Wall, yew bet, an' he'll die game too! Thar ain't no doubt but his time is near."

"What—to die?"

"Yes."

"What makes you think that?"

"Oh, the gang under Burke Bent have sworn to kill him, an' they'll surely do it. He's the greatest outlaw in these parts. It's a fact that he's in league with ther bushrangers."

"Indeed!"

"That's ther way affairs are up in the Cape Diggins. Any day there's apt to be an outbreak. The gamblers and sharps an' cutthroats are under Burke Bent. The best men an' honest miners are under Jack Danby."

"Jack ought to have help."

"Sure he ought, fer he's in need of it. He's a white man. I'm one of his men."

"That speaks well for you. Well," continued Frank, "we'll see what we can do for him when we get up there."

"Well, if yew kin help him any you'll do the right thing. But say, stranger!"

"Well?"

"What are you going up to Dry Lake for?"

"To look for gold."

"Whew!"

Jackson passed a hand over his eyes.

"You'll git thar," he went on. "Yer've got the outfit to do it, an' I kin tell you that it's the biggest gold layout in this kentry."

"We are glad to hear that," said Frank.

"I wisht I was going with ye."

"You can go with us to Cape Diggings anyway," said Frank. "I am anxious to see the place."

"Let her boom," cried Sike, and he whistled to his pony.

"Kin I ride on yure wagon?"

"Of course, but your horse——"

"Oh, he'll foller, yew may be sure. He's all right."

This settled the matter.

The machine moved away rapidly. The herder's horse sure enough followed on behind.

At times the machine ran too fast for him.

But he kept the trail with unerring instinct just the same.

At this rate the ten miles was quickly covered. Cape Diggings suddenly burst into view.

A collection of odd-looking shanties, made of logs and boughs, covered a space of many acres upon a little grassy plain.

Scattered over this plain were the awnings of the diggers and heaps of upturned earth.

Shafts had been sunk by the hundred, and ever, where the miners tunneled the auriferous earth like veritable mole.

This was the method of mining in Cape Diggings.

Every now and then a rich find was made.

This would stimulate others into fresh efforts, and thus the engrossing quest went on.

That was what the miners were doing.

Up in the little town in the barroom of the log hotel lonnged a collection of sharps and gamblers, waiting for their victims to return in the evening and be fleeced.

And this was enacted every night. The lucky miners became luckless in the grasp of the gambler.

Jack Danby, the hotel keeper, countenanced fair play at cards.

"It's an even chance," he said, "an' them that's fools enough to try it must risk a loss. But I kain't say I like it myself."

He was death upon a thief or criminal of any kind.

Many a villain had swung from the branch of some nearby tree at his instigation.

But he had made no real enemies until he had crossed the path of Burke Bent.

The latter was the ruler of the lawless element, and was even said to be one of the few in league with the bush-rangers.

This was the state of affairs in Cape Diggings when the Electric Car appeared on the scene.

It need hardly be said that a sensation was created when the machine rolled into the town.

Men from near and far flocked excitedly about the queer vehicle.

It was like nothing they had ever seen before, and it was small wonder that they were interested.

Frank leaped down and shook hands with Jack Danby, the proprietor of the hotel.

He had barely finished a pleasant conversation with him when Dane plucked him by the sleeve.

"There's the Burke Bent of whom Mr. Jackson has told you!" he said. "Is he not a cutthroat?"

Frank looked in the direction indicated, and saw a tall, broad-shouldered man.

He wore a wide-brimmed hat, intensely black whiskers

and his dark eyes gleaming like balls of fire were fixed upon Frank.

In spite of himself the young inventor experienced a chill.

"On my word!" he muttered. "I can't say that I like his looks. He's a natural murderer."

"Jest so!" rejoined Sike Jackson. "he's a bad man to meet on a dark night."

Frank shrugged his shoulders.

"We will not trouble him," he said, "unless he troubles us!"

"He may try few make it unpleasant for ye," said Sike. "He don't like strangers for a copper."

"He will bark up the wrong tree," said Frank quietly.

It was decided to spend the night in the town; as soon as it became known that the newcomers were Dry Lake prospectors, some excitement was created.

There were enough anxious to go to that locality; but Frank declined all offers.

As darkness came on, a red light was hung out before the door of the little hotel, and then the denizens of the place began to flock thither.

The gamblers held forth in the barroom and foolish victims constantly dropped into their webs.

Some stood at the bar and drank and chatted. Others discussed the events of the day in little knots.

It was nearly ten o'clock when Frank and Dane strolled into the place to take a look at Australian life in a mining camp.

To Frank it was by no means an inviting scene.

He abhorred gambling and gagged at the foulness of the air in the place.

Jack Danby came out to talk with them.

"There's no doubt, gentlemen," he said, "but that ye'll make a big haul in Dry Lake."

"I hope so," said Frank.

"If ye kin open up that country ye'll do this country a great service."

"We mean to do that."

"Success to ye."

"But there's one thing sure," said Frank deliberately, "if I start a camp at Dry Lake there'll be no state of terrorism there such as reigns here, and, as far as I can learn, is instigated by one man, probably a bully and a coward."

Danby's face paled a trifle.

"Sh!" he said. "We'll talk that over in private."

But the words were not out of his lips when Frank was rudely jostled, and he looked up into the sinister face and cruel black eyes of a powerfully framed man.

CHAPTER IX.

IN TASMAN LAND.

It was Burke Bent.

The giant towered above Frank, and met his gaze with an insolence and raillery which caused the young inventor to flush crimson.

"Hello, bantam!" gritted the fellow with a coarse laugh. "What are ye doin' so far from yer coop? Ain't ye afraid of hawks?"

For a moment Frank's blood fairly boiled.

His impulse was to strike the wretch full in the mouth. But wisely he restrained himself.

"Are you addressing yourself to me, sir?" he said sharply.

"Am I?" exclaimed the villain. "kain't yew see my condescension!"

"Then you may spare yourself further trouble," retorted Frank. "I do not hold intercourse with impertinent curs like you."

With which Frank coolly resumed his conversation with Danby, who had drawn a revolver and held it behind him.

The scene was one worthy of an artist.

Bent stood black as night glaring down at his defier. Had it been any other man in the camp he would have plunged his knife into his back. But something about the young American commanded his respect.

He hesitated, and then turned and strode away a few steps. Every eye in the bar-room was upon him.

Danby whispered again:

"You are reckless, Mister Reade. I advise you to get out of this side door; it'll save ye trouble. The cuss oughter die, but thar ain't anybody got courage enough to kill him."

"Excuse me, Mr. Danby," said Frank coolly; "I have met men of his ilk before. He will not trouble me. I am not at all afraid of him."

"Yew an't?"

"No."

"Yew are the coolest man I ever saw. We'll all stand by ye to a man!"

Danby stepped behind the bar to serve a drink. Frank turned and was about to address Wallace Dane when there was a quick, sharp report.

Jack Danby, the hotel keeper, with a groan threw up his arms and fell.

A bullet had penetrated his temple. The smoking pistol was in the hand of Bent.

The crisis had come.

The murderer had selected his first victim. Like a maddened bull he stood in the centre of the floor.

Some of the habitués of the place ran out the door. Others sat awestruck and unable to act.

But Sike Jackson emitted one long wolf-like cry.

"Revenge!" he shouted. "Up, honest men, and clean out Burke Bent and his gang. Stand firm!"

In an instant an indescribable scene followed.

Volleys of pistol shots rang through the room. Knives clashed and men closed in deadly conflict.

In the midst of it the man who had started the affair escaped.

Where he went no one could tell. Unwilling to mix up in such a fray, Frank and Dane managed to get back to the Electric Car.

The fight in the bar-room came to a sudden termination.

The two factions retreated into the street. They divided into opposing forces and the battle was carried on behind cabins and trees.

In the midst of it a gang of men on horseback came riding into the town.

At their head Burke Bent was seen. All carried flaming torches which they applied to the buildings.

It was a struggle for existence now.

The miner and honest man was fighting for his home against the votaries of evil and of destruction.

The battle seemed an uneven one until a man blood-stained and panting, sprung onto the deck of the Electric Car.

It was Jackson.

"For the love of God give us help, Mr. Reade!" he cried.

"If you don't they will wipe out the town! I beg of you to give us help!"

Frank sprang into the pilothouse.

"To arms, every one!" he cried. "Come in here, Jackson. We will wipe out this murderous Bent and his gang!"

What followed was like swift and unerring justice.

Frank was always averse to the taking of human life. But this he could not help but regard as warrantable warfare.

He trained the electric gun upon the gang of incendiaries. Then he discharged it.

The dynamite bomb exploded in their midst. The effect was fearful to witness.

Full half a score of the murdering crew were wiped out of existence.

Through the town the machine swept.

Barney and Pomp with their rifles picked off many.

In less time than it takes to tell of it the gang was put to flight. Among the slain was Burke Bent.

The death of Jack Danby was avenged. Order and justice were once more established in Cape Diggings.

Our adventurers remained in the place for two days.

In that time a new regime was put in force, and better things were promised for the little mining town.

The Electric Car took its departure amid the hearty cheers of the miners. She left Cape Diggings behind and once more resumed the long journey across Australia to Tasman Land.

For weeks she kept on her course over plains and mountains, through jungles and forests. To attempt to give in detail all the minor incidents would be an endless task.

But one day she crossed the boundary line of Queensland and was in the wilds of North Australia.

Here were great alkali plains where for hundreds of miles no living bit of vegetation or creature was seen.

Only the grayish, dust-choked plain of interminable length.

On and on the Car ran at its best speed.

In this level, open country remarkably good time could be made; so Frank kept speed up.

Across the province of North Australia the Electric Car finally made its way.

And one day Frank made a reckoning and said:

"We have crossed the boundary. We are at last in Tasman Land."

The region now became familiar to Dane, who said:

"We ought in four days to reach the Dry Lake."

This roused the spirits of all. They looked forward with eager interest to what was coming.

The country now began to undergo a great change.

It rapidly became mountainous and rocky, and there were arid, sandy plains between.

Frank noted this.

"I don't wonder," he said, "that rivers and lakes in this region dry up. There is nothing here to sustain vegetation."

"Which is very true," agreed Dane, "and yet at a certain season of the year you would not know this region."

"How so?"

"It is clothed in green and looks as fresh as any part of the country. This is during the wet season when the rivers and lakes are full."

"Is it possible?"

"Indeed it is; but a couple of months of torrid heat and drought bring it to what you now see."

"That is very curious," said Frank.

The machine now experienced some trouble in picking its way through the rough section.

It was necessary to thread one's way among the rocks and ledges and down steep descents.

Animal life was scarce, and it could be seen that human beings could hardly hope to sustain life long in that region.

Water even was not to be obtained.

But those on board the car fortunately had plenty of provisions and water; they had little to fear.

But yet a mishap was liable at any time to befall the Car. This was one of Frank's fears.

Dry Lake was yet a hundred miles distant.

As he surveyed the region Frank could not help the remark:

"The gold in Dry Lake is very sure to be safe for an indefinite length of time unless the climate undergoes a change in these regions. No human being with ordinary appliances could hope to penetrate to it."

"That is wherein our advantage lies!" cried Dane. "I

knew very well that as soon as I was able to get you enlisted in the scheme that I was sure of success."

"I believe you are right," said Frank. "only the Electric Car could safely penetrate hither."

"Certainly few human beings could accomplish the feat," said Dane. "I know of but one man who returned alive."

"Then the feat has been attempted?"

"Indeed, yes. One expedition contained forty pack horses and a hundred men. It was never heard of!"

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes, I do."

"That was awful!"

"Indeed it was. They probably fell victims to the awful climate and starvation. There were other expeditions. The only man who ever returned was Long Mike, an Irish miner, who had lived for years with bush rangers, and knew how to live on snakes and reptiles, as well as insects."

"Whew! that is a most undesirable sort of knowledge!"

"True."

Even as they were discussing the matter Pomp, who was at the rail, cried:

"Fo' massy sakes, Marse Frank, jes' cum yere."

"What is the matter, Pomp?"

"Yo' jes' cum an' sec fo' yo'sef, sah."

Frank went to the rail. What he saw amazed him.

CHAPTER X.

IN A QUICKSAND.

It horrified him as well. It was a grewsome sight.

There, stretched along a series of foothills were piles of bones. Part of them were seen to be human.

Dane was at once interested. He began at once to count the skeletons. There were full eighty.

"I believe that is the remains of the big excursion," he cried. "They certainly met an awful fate."

"That is so, poor souls!"

The gold-seekers gazed upon the ghastly remains of their predecessors with queer emotions.

It was not impossible that their bones might also thus whiten the awful desert.

Yet the chances were the other way. Frank turned away.

"That is the result of starting out an expedition not properly provided for," he said. "It was plainly a foolish undertaking."

"And yet they no doubt felt sure of success," said Dane; "they carried provisions and equipments on their mules. But it is my opinion that they lost their way."

"That would not be difficult."

"Not a bit."

On rolled the Electric Car.

Frank reckoned that in twenty-four hours more they would reach the Dry Lake. It was a suspenseful time.

Dane had begun to get nervous and excited. It seemed to him as if the machine could not go fast enough.

"Well," said Frank, "are we at all in danger of a conflict with the bushmen?"

"Not very great," replied Dane; "of course they have and do penetrate as far into the desert as this. But we shall not find them in dangerous number."

"I am glad of that. I have a horror of the fellows."

"You are not alone. Others are the same."

A long, level stretch was now reached. The machine was making rapid time over this when a curious thing happened.

Of a sudden the machine gave a lurch and came to a sudden halt.

The dynamos buzzed and the forward end of the car went down at an angle of forty-five degrees.

"What the deuce has happened?" cried Dane.

Barney had presence of mind enough to shut off the dynamos. A quick examination showed at once what was the trouble.

The forward trucks of the car were out of sight in a huge bar of sand.

That it was quicksand was certain.

"Heigho!" cried Frank in dismay. "Now we are stuck."

"We are mired!" exclaimed Dane.

"Yes."

"Can we get out?"

"I hope so. We narrowly escaped going head first into the heart of the quicksand. If we had all would have been over with us."

"I don't see how we are to get out," said Dane dubiously.

"Well, we will try it!" said Frank.

All got out and Frank examined the wagon's position and studied her chances.

As a result he said:

"I believe her engines will pull her out. We'll try it."

He went into the cabin with Barney and brought out some strong cable. A part of this was knitted about a distant boulder.

The other was attached to a windlass on the deck of the Electric Car.

The engines were put to work and taxed to their utmost. But yet they failed to lift the wheels out of the clinging sand.

Again and again the attempt was made. But it always failed.

The Electric Car was undoubtedly stuck. Here was a serious predicament.

The voyagers were dismayed.

"By the hornspoon!" exclaimed Dane, "what are we going to do? This certainly looks dubious."

"Bejabers we'll niver get off at this that way," cried Barney; "if we put on much more steam, sure we'll bust the machinery, bad luck to it!"

"Golly! I don't see wha' we'se gwine ter do!" said Pomp. "We'se jes' in a bad fix!"

But Frank was cool and matter of fact.

He got down and walked as far forward as the treacherous sands would allow him.

He studied the position of the Car carefully. In vain he tried to think of a plan.

There was no forest near where supporting timbers could be cut. The ledges were the only thing about which ropes could be bound.

The Australian sun beat down with torrid fierceness.

It was almost unbearable, and finally forced the adventurers to seek the cover of awnings on the deck.

Work of any kind was out of the question.

There was but one thing that could be done, and that was to wait until the sun should go down.

Dane was better used to the climate than the others, and said:

"This is nothing to the heat of some great salt plains north of here."

"Well, if it is any worse than this, deliver me from an

Australian life," said Frank. "I am contented to remain on American soil."

"It is a fact," said Dane, "that the richest gold fields in Australia are found in the most inaccessible places. It seems as if some fate had built a barrier about them."

"By the time we shall find the gold we shall have earned it," laughed Frank.

"I quite agree with you."

Gradually the Australian day came to a close.

The sun settled below the western horizon, and the dews of night came on.

In the twilight work was once more begun on the car; new cables were bent and various angles tried.

The result was not altogether unsatisfactory.

The car did budge a little and hopes were brightened. But just when it seemed likely that the car would be released Dane gave a wild cry of alarm.

"Look out!" he shouted; "flee for your lives. The bushmen are upon us."

The warning was like an electric shock to the voyagers.

All knew what it meant.

It is hardly necessary to say that no time was lost in getting aboard the machine.

They were none too soon. As Barney dodged into the cabin a poisoned dart followed him and struck the jamb of the door.

The doors and shutters were instantly closed, and rifles were brought out.

The foe as usual were not in sight.

But the gold seekers knew well enough that every boulder and ledge concealed a number of the bushmen. They were everywhere.

Now they succeeded in tracking the machine so far over the desert wastes was an unfathomable mystery.

Nothing but a bushranger could have done it and sustained himself. Frank remarked this.

"It is true," said Dane; "they will go days without food or water, and then think they are well fed on a rock mouse or a frog. They know where to look for such articles of food. They have the keen scent of a dog."

While the bushmen seemed a despicable foe, yet they were able to give our voyagers in their present predicament a heap of trouble.

The truth was they did not dare to show themselves for even the slightest moment on deck.

It would have meant exposure to the poison darts, and consequently death.

The probability was that the bushmen would maintain the siege for an indefinite length of time.

"Well," said Frank doggedly, "we have provisions for a year. They cannot sustain themselves in this barren region that long."

"Ah, but they will not be compelled to," said Dane. "Long before then we shall be compelled to move. The rainy season comes on in two months. Then this whole plain will become a lake."

Frank was silent.

But a line of resolution curled about the corners of his lips. He was in a determined frame of mind.

"We will see about it," he muttered.

To use the electric gun was impossible, for it was forward and inclined toward the ground, so that a range could not be made with it.

Such offensive warfare as was possible to conduct must be with rifles.

These of course could not be effective unless a bushman showed himself. And this would be a rare occurrence.

Altogether the outlook was not a very favorable one.

However, Barney and Pomp kept sharp watch, while Frank went into the pilothouse to study up a plan of operation.

While thus engaged darkness began to shut down. In spite of their apparent superiority all felt a nervous chill.

The bushmen were unlike an ordinary foe.

They were so stealthy and cunning that one knew not what to expect. One might appear at one's elbow at any moment.

So darkness brought an indescribable sense of terror down upon the voyagers.

The search light and the cabin lights made a wide radius, but experience had demonstrated that the foe could reach the Car without being seen just the same.

So the fears of all under these circumstances were quite pardonable. However, Barney and Pomp patrolled the cabin and kept watch.

Suddenly Barney espied what he believed to be a dark form burrowing in the sand not ten yards from the Car.

The Celt instantly raised his rifle to fire.

CHAPTER XI.

A WELCOME RELEASE—HEAPS OF GOLD.

"Be me sowl!" he cried, "if that's wan av the divils he'd better say his prayers. Have at yez!"

The Celt took aim at the object and fired.

There was a strange, wild cry, a dark form rose in the air and then the crisis came.

It seemed as if the vicinity was alive with bushmen.

It was an open attack and they descended upon the machine like ravenous wolves.

"Hold steady!" shouted Frank Reade, Jr., "don't let them come aboard. Give them a volley."

This was done.

As fast as the Winchesters could be operated they blended in one loud and continuous report.

The bushmen fell in heaps, but they recked not.

They appeared to be utterly oblivious of the rifle balls so deadly, and came piling over the rail in legions. They swarmed upon the deck and began to hammer with their axes upon the doors and windows.

They would certainly have effected an entrance had it not been for Frank Reade, Jr.

The young inventor saw that it was of no use to contest with the rifles at such short range.

So he quickly employed another plan.

He gave a quick, sharp order.

"All come into the pilothouse lively!" he shouted, "don't lose any time?"

The others obeyed.

Frank produced some stools with glass legs.

"Get on to these!" he cried: "they are non-conductors. I am going to charge the body of the car!"

"Great Scott!" cried Dane, "can you do that, Frank?"

"Of course, I can!"

All got upon the stools. Then Frank made a quick con-

nection between the key-board and some wires connected with the steel body of the car.

"Ready!" he cried. "Keep close to the stools, or you will get a shock you will never forget."

"All right!" cried Dane.

Barney and Pomp signified the same. Then quick as a flash the connection was made.

The result was exciting.

The deck and roof of the car was swarming with bushmen. A great surprise dawned upon them.

The next moment the air was filled with hustling and tumbling bushmen.

They were hurled from their perch like flies. Yells and shrieks of agony rose above the din.

In less time than it takes to tell it the machine was cleared of its invaders.

A new attacking party came on, but they did not succeed in crossing the rail.

It did not require much of this sort of treatment to quell the spirits of the attacking foe.

They were compelled to abandon the attack and withdrew much discomfited. In a few seconds not one of them was in sight.

The repulse was successful and the victory a signal one. All in the party were triumphant.

"That is the way to treat them," cried Dane, exuberantly: "they will not soon forget that!"

"It seems as if they ought to conclude to leave us alone after awhile," declared Frank.

"If they do not they are fools!"

"So say I!"

The bushmen in their retreat carried away their dead and wounded, so that it was impossible to say how many were victims.

They did not renew their attack and kept at a safe distance. In the morning no sign of them was visible anywhere.

Had our adventurers been less experienced they would have thought that the foe had finally abandoned the attack.

But they knew better than this. No chances were taken.

But with the coming of daylight again the question of escape was brought forth.

The cable yet remained in its position about the distant ledge. It was odd that the bushmen had not cut this.

"We will make one more effort!" cried Frank; "perhaps we may succeed this time."

"Good!" cried Dane. "We will pray for it!"

The appearance of the quicksand seemed to encourage hope. It seemed to have changed its appearance during the night.

It seemed less firm and to have shifted its volume a trifle to another quarter. That this was possible after developments proved.

The engines were started.

The strain on the cable was terrific. It was a moment of suspense.

Then Dane cried:

"Hurrah! She moves!"

That was true. The machine had moved for but a short ways, it was true, yet it was something.

Again Frank tried.

Again the machine moved.

All were now intensely excited. It seemed certain that the machine was coming slowly but surely out of the sand.

Again and again the engines were tried.

Joyful result.

Each time the machine came higher and higher out of the quicksand. At length the cable began to wind up quickly on the windlass.

Frank threw the ratchet off and let the rope run off the drum. Then he applied the reverse speed to the wheels of the Car.

She moved quickly back onto the plain. Her speed began to accelerate and Frank shut it off.

The cheers of the travelers were loud and hearty.

"That is squeezing out of a hard scrape!" cried Dane, "but we're out of it."

They fairly embraced each other in their joy.

The cable was drawn aboard and the Car started forward, this time shunning the quicksand.

Her wheels were a trifle clogged with sand, but otherwise she was all right, and ran on as fast as ever.

The locality and the bushmen as well were left behind. They were now rapidly approaching the Dry lake.

It began to look as if their trip would be a success; but Frank was not quite easy in his mind.

"I don't see," he said, "what better off we are going to be when we reach Dry Lake."

"Why?" asked Dane, in surprise.

"Why, these confounded bushmen. They are bound to follow us and make trouble for us everywhere."

"The bed of the lake is very clear," said the Australian. "By keeping a good watch I think we can fool them."

"I hope so. Certainly we can do no mining if we must stand in fear of their deadly darts all the while."

"That is true," agreed Dane; "but I believe we can adjust that matter all right."

"I hope so."

An hour later the machine topped a rise, and the bed of the famous Dry Lake lay before them.

As far as the eye could reach the gravelly basin extended to the westward. On the North there were visible high cliffs. To the South the same.

The machine rolled down the slope to the edge of the basin. Here Frank brought it to a halt.

"Are you sure it is safe to venture out there, Dane?" he asked; "are there no quicksands?"

"None at all," assured the Australian; "go right along. It will be all right."

With this assurance Frank let the car run down to the bed of the basin.

It was easy for the explorers to see that they were in the bed of a great inland sea.

Instinctively all eyes were fixed upon the gravel looking for signs of gold.

The machine ran a mile or more out into the basin. Then by Dane's request Frank stopped it.

"There!" cried the Australian. "No bush native can approach us now without being seen."

Fortunately the boiling sun was under a cloudy sky. It was possible to seek for gold without the imminent danger of being overcome.

No time was lost.

Frank and Dane and Barney, with picks and spades descended from the car. Pomp remained aboard.

Frank had barely stepped into the sands when he gave an exclamation.

A shining lump of something lay in the sand; he picked it up with a start.

It was a small nugget of gold.

Forgotten was all else in that moment of excitement. The fever instantly had them.

They pursued the quest with unabated zeal for hours: only darkness cut it short.

There was need of little digging.

The gold was in lumps on the surface; some of the nuggets were nearly as large as one's fist.

Again and again they carried great loads of the ore to the dock of the Electric Car.

Pomp had sacks ready in which it was safely stored. These multiplied rapidly.

"Why, there is gold enough here to buy a kingdom," cried Frank excitedly. "We must have a million dollars' worth aboard already!"

"You are right!" cried Dane excitedly. "We want at least a million each to take back with us!"

Darkness, however, began to cut short the quest. It was decided to postpone the hunt until another day.

It was a feverish night for all in the party. They slept but little.

During the night there arose signs of a terrific storm. Thunder pealed and lightning flashed.

When day came it was seen that rain was descending. The sky was overhung with awful, threatening clouds.

Dane regarded these somewhat with apprehension.

"Have I made a mistake in calculation?" he said. "It looks to me like the line storm."

"Do you think so?" asked Frank, in dismay.

"It looks like it!"

"And what if it is?"

"Why, in forty-eight hours the bed of this lake will be covered with water. That is an end to our mining operations."

"It cannot be possible, however, that this storm will be so severe as all that."

Dane consulted his almanac and the barometer.

"No," he said, "this can be nothing more than a light electrical storm. At any rate we will accept it as such. Let us push further into the basin."

Accordingly the Car was started forward. For miles she ran on over the bed of the basin.

Then the storm broke. The rain descended in torrents. It seemed as if the gates of Heaven were loosed, and all the water was falling upon that particular spot.

CHAPTER XII.

A TRANSFORMATION—THE END.

Indeed, the rain continued with such force that water began to form in the bed of the lake.

In a short while it was over the tires.

"It will break away soon," Dane had said.

But as it continued the Australian became suddenly alarmed.

"On my word," he cried, in consternation, "the lake is going to fill. If we stay here we shall be drowned like rats in a trap."

"Then it is demanded that we get out!" said Frank.

"You are right!"

Accordingly the machine was started for the opposite side of the lake. The water began to arise with such alarming rapidity that Frank put on all speed.

The water picked up by the wheels flew in a blinding spray all over the machine. On it ran for the opposite shore.

Before it was reached the water was up to the hubs. It was a close call.

Not until the machine had run out of the water and was safe on the high banks did any in the party feel secure.

Then each drew a breath of relief, and Dane cried:

"That is a close call for us. Mercy, how it rains! This must be the line storm, and it has come earlier this year."

"In that case," said Frank, "the lake will fill."

"Yes."

"When will it open again?"

"Not for six months. It is a bitter disappointment to me. I can assure you, for we can mine no more."

All were of course disappointed as they realized this fact. Yet Frank said:

"However, we have recovered quite a snug little fortune. We are fairly well repaid."

And so the spirits of all revived. It became now a positive certainty that the Dry Lake gold field was closed for many months.

Where there had been a few hours before a dry, arid basin was now a deep tempestuous lake. The transformation was as sudden as it was strange.

"One of the peculiarities of the Australian continent," declared Dane; "there are others as well."

The storm raged with increased fury. It was folly to attempt to travel through it.

So the gold-seekers assembled in the cabin of the Car and discussed a plan of action.

"Certainly there is no use in staying here," said Frank. "We can do no more gold seeking in Dry Lake this year."

"That is true," agreed Dane in a regretful way.

"Golly! den I done fink we had better go home!" said Pomp.

"Bejabers it's a foine place fer us all," averred Barney.

"What do you say, Dane?" asked Frank. "Are you ready to go home?"

"It is our best course," agreed the Australian.

"Are you satisfied?"

"Indeed yes. Perhaps I can open up the gold mines here another year."

"Now that you have visited the place it will not be so difficult."

"Exactly."

"Now—what is our best route?"

Dane was thoughtful.

"It is a long way back to Brisbane," he said.

"Yes, and we cannot go home by the Oceania, for she is gone."

"That is so. I have an idea."

"Well?"

"Why not complete the trip across Australia, make a bee line for the west coast? There are many small towns there. We can find a coasting vessel and work our way to Perth, and from thence down to Melbourne."

"Done!" cried Frank; "it shall be so. When the storm ceases we will start."

This was well said. But the storm lasted many days.

In that time the whole country underwent a remarkable transformation.

Rivers and lakes appeared where there had formerly been nothing but sandy basins and dry courses.

On the high land green vegetation began miraculously to shoot forth.

It was a wonderful sight.

"Well!" said Frank in amazement. "I never saw the equal of this in my life. It is like a fairy trick."

"Come along here a month later," said Dane, "and you will not know this region. You will think it the most fertile part of Australia."

"It is very wonderful!"

"Then will be the time for the cunning speculator in Melbourne or some other place to bring greenhorns up here and sell them cattle ranges with 'virgin soil' unfed and undeveloped. Many a poor victim has thus suffered."

"It would be a dishonest trick," said Frank.

"And yet it is done! Oh, the baseness of human nature!"

When the storm did clear there were cool, gray skies and a refreshing south wind. To the Americans this was most welcome.

As soon as the nature of the ground would allow the car was started on its journey to the west coast.

This trip was not devoid of incident, as we shall see.

Dane was thoroughly familiar with this region, as he had dwelt many years in it.

After a run of some few hundred miles the region of perpetual fertility was reached.

Here they came upon civilization in an advanced stage. There were cattle and sheep ranches, immense ostrich farms, and comfortable villages.

The appearance of the Electric Car in this region created something of a sensation, as well it might.

The people flocked from near and far to see it.

They were extremely hospitable and friendly, so that our travelers fared exceedingly well.

But in an ill advised moment Dane let slip the fact that they had just come from the Dry Lake diggings, and had just one million dollars in gold aboard the car.

In all communities there are lawless spirits.

The report reached the ears of one of these, and finally reached Ostrich Bill, one of the most notorious desperadoes in North Australia.

It was but short work for Ostrich Bill to form a gang and waylay the Electric Car. It was done in a skillful way.

Beyond a small town known as Caillness there was a narrow mountain pass. Beyond this was the borough of Newville, a settlement of French people.

In this pass the outlaws planned to hold up the Electric Car.

Barney was at the wheel, and it was just at dusk. All were anxious to reach Newville before dark.

Suddenly the car gave a lunge, a recoil, and came to a stop. There was a curious creaking and straining, and the dynamos buzzed.

Frank rushed forward from the cabin.

"What's the matter, Barney?" he cried. "What has happened?"

"Shure, sor, divil a bit do I know, but it luks as if there was a rope across the pass in front av us, sor!"

"A rope!" exclaimed Frank, "shut off speed. The machinery will break."

Barney shut off the electric current. Directly above the Car was a ledge.

Down from this like monkeys there dropped a half dozen masked men upon the deck of the Car.

The door was open and before any had seen them they had sprung into the cabin.

A wild cry of warning went up from Pomp.

"Golly fo' glory! We am done fo' dis time!" he yelled. "Marse Frank, look out, sah!"

"Surrender, or ye'll die!" yelled Ostrich Bill, waving a revolver.

Frank and Barney acted with great quickness. Both dropped instantly behind the key board and Barney kicked the steel door of the pilot-house shut.

"Begorra, they'll never cum that thrick on us!" cried the Celt, as he barred the door.

Bullets rained against it, but it was bullet proof. The outlaws threw themselves against it, but it did not yield.

They ran back through the cabin. But Pomp and Dane had barred the door to the saloon. The villains had the run of the cabin, but no more.

In vain they tried to batter down the steel doors. They would not yield. Baffled in this way, Ostrich Bill resorted to a parley.

"Come out an' divvy on that Dry Lake gold," he said, "an' we'll let ye off. See?"

"I don't believe you will," said Frank cuttingly; "get out of that cabin and leave this car in two minutes or it will be the worse for you!"

"Do you think I'm a fool!" growled the villain.

"I don't care what you are. That is your chance."

"Haw—haw! We kin keep you in there until ye git hungry. Listen to common sense and come out. We only want a fair divvy."

"You'll get nothing!"

"We won't, eh?"

"Not a bit!"

Infuriated, the brute again fired at the door: no harm was done; Frank was now angry.

He opened a little slide in the door unseen by the villains and put the muzzle of a revolver through.

Crack!

Ostrich Bill, with an awful oath, dropped. Frank fired again without aim: seeing that their leader was winged, the other ruffians fled.

They left the car precipitately: the attempt to rob our gold seekers had proved a failure.

Frank and Barney burst out of the pilot house. The villain, Ostrich Bill, was only wounded, however, and not seriously at that.

He was left cursing and swearing in the defile: the cable stretched in front of the car was cut, and she went on to Newville that night.

In this little French town they were made welcome and stayed for a couple of days. They were now but a little ways from the coast, and preparations were made for a sea voyage.

A day later they reached Freeport, a small coast town. Here they were lucky enough to find the captain of a stanch brig.

Captain Cutter agreed to take them to Perth where a Melbourne steamer could be obtained.

The machine was taken apart and packed in sections in the hold of the Kangaroo.

When the brig sailed out of the little harbor of Freeport all knew that the great trip across Australia was ended.

All now thought of home. It was a magic word.

In due course the Kangaroo reached Perth. The travelers there made a sojourn of a week.

Here their gold nuggets were exchanged for drafts. It netted a handsome division for all.

On the whole the expedition had been a great success. But when the Melbourne steamer was boarded Dane remained behind.

"I don't think I will return to America," he said. "I like Australia and have decided to make my home in Perth. Some day I shall endeavor again to open up the Dry Lake gold fields."

Of course, Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp could only wish him success and take a warm farewell.

A few months later the three famous travelers arrived in San Francisco.

From there they proceeded at once to Readestown. They were glad to get home, but the famous trip across Australia was to remain long in their memories. And with this announcement, dear reader, we will end our tale.

THE END.

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